

State of research article

Patterns of urban rebellion in medieval Flanders

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Abstract

The medieval county of Flanders experienced an extraordinary number of rebellions and revolts, opposing the count, the patricians and the urban middle classes, in various combinations. If the fluctuating balance of power inclined too sharply to one group, or if specific demands of privileged citizens were not fulfilled because they lacked access to power, political challengers rebelled. Representative organs could solve socio-political and economic problems, but a rebellion usually ended in a struggle between social groups and networks within the towns and a war between rebel regimes and prince. These two struggles continuously intermingled and created a rebellious dynamic, ending in victory or defeat and in repression and, in turn, inspiring the next rebellion. This remarkable pattern of rebellion started in the phase of ‘communal emancipation’, in the twelfth century, a period in which the counts granted privileges to the Flemish towns, as social and political contradictions developed within the city. From the 1280s until the end of the fourteenth century, craft guilds constructed alliances with other challengers, such as noblemen, and fought for political representation and control over fiscal and economic policies. As state power became more and more important after the arrival of the centralising Burgundian dynasty in Flanders, this pattern changed significantly. The urban elites gradually sided with the dukes and urban rebellions became less successful. This did not mean, however, that the Flemish rebellious tradition was exhausted. The end of the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century would witness new challenges to princely power. In this article we will consider the role of alliances and leadership, ideology, mobilisation and rebellious ‘repertoires’ in medieval Flemish towns.

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Keywords: Urban society; Low Countries; Collective action; Medieval revolts

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‘Instead of treating us honourably, you have oppressed us. You have broken your promises and oaths by persecuting us unjustly and perversely. As a lawless and faithless count, you have only one thing to do, and that is to get out and leave your subjects free to elect a successor’.¹

On 16 February 1128, nobleman Iwein of Alost declared the reasons that the city of Ghent renounced its allegiance to the Flemish count William Clito. His speech expressed the citizens’ latent dissatisfaction with the policy of the count, to whom they felt they owed no further obedience. They rebelled. The frequency of this kind of political conflict in Flanders, especially in an urban context, is a unique phenomenon in medieval Europe. In this contribution, by making use of the concepts for studying ‘collective actions’ developed by Charles Tilly and other theorists, and in the light of recent historical research,² we will systematically reassess revolts and rebellions in medieval Flanders, looking for patterns and *repertoires*, and showing that rebellions formed a fundamental feature of political culture in a county that belonged to one of the most developed regions of Europe. We want both to clarify the origins of these urban revolts in the short term and to shed light on the remarkably rebellious behaviour of the Flemish citizens in the long run, from the twelfth to the sixteenth century.

Romantic historians of the nineteenth century treated revolts of Flemish citizens as chaotic outbursts of mad crowds lead by heroic freedom-fighters who resisted cruel oppressors.³ Nationalist and liberal positivists, however, regarded revolts as a threat to the state they adored and often evaluated them negatively, although they did read the sources more critically. In their positivist search for laws and systematic processes in history, they described regular patterns in medieval revolts. According to Henri Pirenne, several main axes of conflict could split medieval society.⁴ Besides class wars between peasants and the nobility in the countryside, Pirenne argued that in the medieval city, citizens were opposed to lords, guilds to patricians, and the poor to the craftsmen. Pirenne’s thesis persisted for many years. In the 1960s and 1970s, the study of medieval revolts struck out on a number of different paths. Employing Marxist theories, East German historians, like Karl Czok, saw revolts as expressions of pre-capitalist class struggle.⁵ Guy Fourquin held a more conservative interpretation, stressing millenarian movements and the role of family clans and individual leadership.⁶ Michel Mollat

¹ Iwein of Alost, 1128. Written down by Galbert of Bruges and translated from Latin by R.C. Van Caenegem, ‘Galbert of Bruges on serfdom, prosecution of crime and constitutionalism (1127–28)’, in: *Law, custom and the social fabric in medieval Europe. Essays in honor of Bryce Lyon*, ed. B. Bachrach and D. Nicholas (Kalamazoo, 1990), 105. Original text: *Galbertus Notarius Brugensis. De multro traditione et occisione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandriarum*, ed. J. Rider (Turnhout, 1994), 142.

² W. Te Brake, *A plague of insurrection. Popular politics and peasant revolt in Flanders, 1323–1328* (Philadelphia, 1993); J. Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand van 1436–1438* (Anciens Pays et Assemblées d’Etats [hereafter APAE], CI–Courtrai-Heule, 1997) and J. Haemers, *De Gentse opstand (1449–1453). De strijd tussen rivaliserende netwerken om het stedelijke kapitaal* (APAE, CV–Courtrai-Heule, 2004).

³ J. Haemers, ‘De dominante staat. De Gentse opstand (1449–1453) in de negentiende- en twintigste-eeuwse historiografie’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen voor de Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, 119 (2004), 39–45 and J. Tollebeek, ‘Historical representation and the nation-state in romantic Belgium (1830–1850)’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 59 (1998), 329–53.

⁴ H. Pirenne, ‘Le mouvement économique et social’, in: *Histoire du moyen âge, VIII: La civilisation occidentale au moyen âge du XIe au milieu du XVe siècle*, ed. G. Glotz (Paris, 1933), 1–189.

⁵ K. Czok, ‘Zunftkämpfe, Zunftrevolutionen oder Bürgerkämpfe’, *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl Marx-Universität Leipzig, Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, 8 (1958–1959), 129–43. Pirenne’s pupil G. Des Marez already saw class conflicts at work in his *Les luttes sociales en Flandre au moyen âge* (Brussels, 1900).

⁶ G. Fourquin, *Les soulèvements populaires au moyen âge* (Paris, 1972).

and Philip Wolff saw conflicts between ‘*les grands*’, ‘*les moyens*’ and ‘*les petits*’ as the root of revolts in the calamitous late middle ages.⁷ Introducing sociological and political theories, Wim Blockmans detected ‘revolutionary mechanisms’ in medieval Flanders.⁸ In a later article, he elaborated on Pirenne’s division of the social battlefield in medieval society. He saw four social antagonisms at work: the count versus the cities, the patricians versus the craftsmen, the peasants versus the nobles and patricians and craftsmen versus other craftsmen.⁹ Recently, Wayne Te Brake formulated a triangulated political constellation of medieval society, consisting of top-down claimants to power, local rulers, and ordinary political subjects, in which the three actors fight for political power.¹⁰

Charles Tilly, identifying repertoires of collective action, divided social upheavals in time. According to Tilly, around 1850 the repertoire of rebels shifted away from local collective actions addressed to local authorities to mediate in conflicts with national elites, to autonomous and national actions in which ordinary people expressed specific claims through representative and formal organisations.¹¹ In both periods people rebelled with standard routines of action, which for the medieval period were identified by Wim Blockmans, who reconstructed the ‘Great Tradition’ of revolts of Low Countries cities against their prince.¹² Marc Boone and Maarten Prak further refined this vision by distinguishing a ‘Little Tradition’ of struggle for power *within* the city, continuously intermingling with the Great Tradition.¹³ Finally, drawing on a great deal of German examples, Peter Blickle detected ‘*Widerstandstraditionen*’, ‘*Konfliktkontinuitäten*’ and spirals of rebellious behaviour in medieval society. In some periods and in some regions, revolts were more likely to appear than in others.¹⁴ This goes especially for medieval Flanders. Since in cities like Ghent and Bruges almost every generation witnessed or joined an urban riot or revolt, it is hardly exaggerated to speak of a ‘revolutionary tradition’ in collective consciousness.¹⁵ But before retrieving this ‘rebellious pattern’, we have to define what is understood by medieval rebellions and revolutions.

⁷ M. Mollat and Ph. Wolff, *Ongles bleus, Jacques et Ciompi. Les révolutions populaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècle* (Paris, 1970).

⁸ W. Blockmans, ‘Revolutionaire mechanismen in Vlaanderen van de 13^e tot de 16^e eeuw’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Wetenschappen*, 19 (1974), 138–9.

⁹ W. Blockmans, ‘The impact of cities on state formation: three contrasting territories in the Low Countries, 1300–1500’, in: *Resistance, representation and community*, ed. P. Blickle (New York, 1997), 262–3.

¹⁰ W. Te Brake, ‘Charles V and his contentious subjects’, in: *Charles V in context: the making of a European identity*, ed. M. Boone and M. Demoor (Brussels, 2003), 127–8.

¹¹ Ch. Tilly, *The contentious French* (Cambridge Mass., 1986), 395 and G. Deneckere, ‘The transforming impact of collective action: Belgium, 1886’, *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), 345–7.

¹² W. Blockmans, ‘Alternatives to monarchical centralisation: the great tradition of revolt in Flanders and Brabant’, in: *Republiken und Republikanismus im Europa der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. H. Koenigsberger (Munich, 1988), 145–54.

¹³ M. Boone and M. Prak, ‘Patricians and burghers: the great and the little tradition of urban revolt in the Low Countries’, in: *A miracle mirrored. The Dutch republic in European perspective*, ed. K. Davids and J. Lucassen (Cambridge, 1995), 99–134.

¹⁴ P. Blickle, *Unruhen in der ständischen Gesellschaft 1300–1800* (Munich, 1988), 46.

¹⁵ V. Lambert and J. Dumolyn, ‘De cruciale decennia in de geschiedenis van een Europese stad. Brugge tussen 1280 en 1302’, in: *Omtrent 1302*, ed. P. Trio, D. Heirbaut and D. van den Auweele (Louvain, 2002), 78; Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 163; R. Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen. Macht en onderdrukking in de Vlaamse steden tijdens de veertiende eeuw* (Bruges, 2005), 153–169.

1. Defining rebellion

Referring to the framework of Charles Tilly, we consider rebellions or revolts a form of collective action; ‘a collective action consists of people’s acting together in pursuit of common interests’.¹⁶ People rebel when they are pursuing shared interests, confronting the existing order and trying to gain political power by violence. Dynamics of economic crisis or growth, specific stakes and demands, or socio-political tensions can motivate a significant amount of people to aspire to political power in order to achieve specific aims. Sometimes rebels sought fairer policy. Sometimes they demanded the abolition of repressive measures. At all times they strove for the fulfilment of socio-political or economic wishes.

Medieval rebels almost never demanded structural changes of society; they just wanted concrete improvements in everyday life.¹⁷ Rebellions and revolts are not revolutions, and this distinction remains the most widely used classification in studies of political violence. Rebellions or revolts, in contrast to revolutions, do not result in a basic structural change of society.¹⁸ They are attempts to obtain concessions from the rulers, not to overthrow existing social, political or economic systems.¹⁹ Whatever social tensions Flemish rebellions reflected, rebels almost never attacked an entire social class or institution. Instead, they only wanted to improve institutions or gain the right to participate in them.²⁰ Moreover, late medieval rebels primarily focused on the defence and restoration of ancient liberties or privileges, striving for an idealised ‘golden age in the past’, with an ideology of renovation, not of innovation.²¹ Fundamentally changing society was never at stake in medieval Flanders.

2. The communal movement

Together with Northern and Central Italy, the county of Flanders comprised the most densely urbanised regions in medieval Europe.²² Since the eleventh century, the process of urbanisation was stimulated by economic developments such as progressive agriculture and a specialisation in export-oriented industrial production.²³ The urban character of the county further determined political and cultural orientation, the organisation of the economy, and the structuring of social relations. Demographic and economic importance determined systems of interaction between commercial gateways and an industrial hinterland, between international and interregional trade centres and regional and local markets, between town and countryside.²⁴ The dense concentration

¹⁶ Ch. Tilly, *From mobilization to revolution* (Reading, 1978), 7.

¹⁷ Y.-M. Bercé, *Révoltes et révolutions dans l’Europe moderne (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1980), 252.

¹⁸ Th. Skocpol, *States and social revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, 1979), 4; P. Zagorin, *Rebels and rulers, 1500-1660* (Cambridge, 1982), I, 22; C. Johnson, *Revolutionary change* (Stanford, 1982), 142-9.

¹⁹ W. Brustein and M. Levi, ‘The geography of rebellion. Rulers, rebels, and regions, 1500 to 1700’, *Theory and society*, 16 (1987), 471 and R. Rotz, ‘“Social struggles” or the price of power? German urban uprisings in the late middle ages’, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 76 (1985), 69-70.

²⁰ R. Rotz, ‘Investigating urban uprisings with examples from Hanseatic towns, 1374-1416’, in: *Order and innovation in the middle ages: essays in honor of Joseph R. Strayer*, ed. W. Jordan, B. McNab and T. Ruiz (Princeton, 1976), 232.

²¹ J. Elliot, ‘Revolution and continuity in early modern Europe’, *Past and Present*, 24 (1969), 44.

²² An overview of Flemish history in D. Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London, 1992).

²³ E. Thoen, ‘A ‘commercial survival economy’ in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (middle ages - 19th century)’, in: *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (middle ages - 19th century) in light of the Brenner debate*, ed. P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. Van Zanden (Turnhout, 2001), 105-11.

²⁴ P. Stabel, *Dwarfs among giants: the Flemish urban network in the late middle ages* (Louvain, 1997), 271 and A. Verhulst, *The rise of cities in north-west Europe* (Cambridge, 1999), 68-156.

of wealth enabled the cities to acquire significant autonomy, but the permanent urban aspiration to gain regional power was ultimately stymied by regional princes and their central governing bodies. The first real confrontation between the main cities of the county (Ghent, Bruges and Ypres) and the feudal prince (the count of Flanders, as a vassal to the French king) took place in the years 1127–28, the starting point of the first, ‘communal’, phase of Flemish urban revolts.

The murder of the Flemish count Charles the Good in March 1127 by the clan of the Erembalds created a vacuum of power in which the Flemish cities emancipated themselves from their feudal lord. The Norman prince William Clito, appointed by the French king Louis VI as the new count in April 1127, showed little sympathy to the ideas of urban liberty, let alone self-government of the Flemish cities. The latter were ruled by a rich elite who had recently gained fortune through the economic boom of trade in the twelfth century. The conflict between the dynastic logic of the great feudal lords, whom the elite held responsible for the deterioration of commerce and industry (caused by an English embargo of the vital imports of wool) and the fundamental commercial interests of the merchant elite, was out in the open.²⁵ The count wanted to skim off the profits of trade and, moreover, he seemed to be restoring a classic feudal political system which the Flemish towns had just overcome. In August 1127, the burghers of Lille rose against count William Clito and his officers after they had arrested a citizen during the yearly market.²⁶ His fellow citizens did not want to return to a world ruled by noble arbitrariness that could endanger the basis of citizenry, its privileged juridical status.

After Lille and Saint-Omer Ghent fought for its juridical and political recognition in February 1128. Even some nobles (among them, Iwein of Alost) joined the citizens, because an autocratic count also limited their local sphere of regional power on the countryside. Surprisingly, this coalition of forces defeated William Clito, who was killed in battle. The new count, Thierry of Alsace, entered into a political pact with the third estate, making this the first occasion on which it played a determining political role in Flemish history.²⁷ According to the burghers, political authority ought to rest on a legitimate base, which was none other than a contract between the ruler and his people, including the right of resistance against an unjust ruler, analogous to the feudal *ius resistendi*. This new principle of ‘constitutionalism’ and the sovereignty of the people became the political basis of Flemish society and was contested throughout the middle ages and beyond.²⁸ During this *Kommunebewegung* (communal development) of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that took place in other parts of Europe as well,²⁹ many Flemish cities (and rural districts) would obtain ‘constitutional’ privileges organising city government and limiting the rights of the count and the lords. The Flemish cities now possessed a large degree of political autonomy from the prince, who was not powerful enough to resist. Making a virtue of necessity, the counts started supporting powerful cities to weaken the third player in the political field, the nobility. The taxes

²⁵ Boone and Prak, *Rulers*, 102; J. Dhondt, ‘Les solidarités médiévales. Une société en transition: la Flandre en 1127–1128’, *Annales. Economies. Sociétés. Civilisations*, 12 (1957), 529–60; R.C. Van Caenegem, ‘The Ghent revolt of February 1128’, in: *Law, history, the Low Countries and Europe*, ed. L. Milis et al. (London, 1994), 107–12; K. Schultz, *Denn sie lieben die Freiheit so sehr... Kommunale Aufstände und Entstehung des europäischen Bürgertums im Hochmittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1992), 101–31.

²⁶ *Galbertus Brugensis*, ed. Rider, 141.

²⁷ J. Dhondt, ‘Les origines des états de Flandre’, *APAE*, I (1950), 3–52.

²⁸ R.C. Van Caenegem, ‘The Ghent revolt’, 110; Blockmans, ‘The impact’, 259; Boone and Prak, ‘Rulers’, 101; W. Blockmans and R. Van Uytven, ‘Constitutions and their application in the Netherlands during the middle ages’, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, 47 (1969), 399–424.

²⁹ Verhulst, *The rise*, 125–31; Schulz, *Denn sie lieben*; Ch. Petit-Dutaillis, *Les communes françaises. Caractères et évolutions des origines au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1947). About ‘Kommunalismus’: P. Blickle, *Kommunalismus. Skizzen einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform* (Munich, 2000), 2 vols.

paid by the cities were, in a way, protection costs from the grip of this common rival, which never became a powerful player in Flemish politics.³⁰

3. Civic emancipation

After this period of ‘communal emancipation’, a phase of ‘civic emancipation’ commenced (1280–1302). Cities had now grown more socially heterogeneous. Flemish sources used a diverse terminology to distinguish the social groups within the urban landscape: ‘poor people who work with their hands’ versus ‘the rich’ (Damme 1280 and Ghent 1397),³¹ *majores oppidani* and *meliores burgenses* versus *ille de communitate qui opus mechanicum exercerent* (Ghent 1308,) or *le commun* versus *les boins de la ville* (Ypres, 1320–1332). The leading social group of the patricians — equivalent to the Italian *popolo grosso*³² — consisted of an oligarchic elite that monopolised political power. Their wealth was based on the possession of urban land and on commercial and financial activities.³³ These merchant-entrepreneurs organised economic life in towns that were predominantly engaged in the production of textiles.³⁴ Under the leadership of these wealthy cloth merchants, the labourers of the textile industry were gradually organised in craft-guilds, but the commoners — like the Italian ‘*popolo minuto*’ — did not participate in political and juridical life.

However, in the second half of the thirteenth century, the first economic disturbances occurred throughout Europe. The vulnerability of large numbers of workers, caused by disruptions in the long-distance trade, made them realise their exploitation.³⁵ Between 1245 and 1320, the towns in Northern France and Flanders proved to be a real seedbed for social turmoil.³⁶ This struggle of the *moyens* against the *grands* had similar characteristics all over Western Europe. Petty commodity producers in the craft-guilds formed a new kind of middle class, distinct from both the patrician families who monopolised politics, and the lower-class proletarians and marginal groups. Though these groups often participated, they rarely initiated revolts on their own behalf or articulated a platform of their own.³⁷ In 1245, the first strikes (called *takehans*) took place in Douai, and were repeated in 1276.³⁸ In the years 1252 and

³⁰ W. Blockmans, ‘Voracious states and obstructing cities: an aspect of state formation in pre-industrial Europe’, *Theory and society*, 18 (1989), 750.

³¹ W. Prevenier, ‘Conscience et perception de la condition sociale chez les gens du commun dans les anciens Pays-Bas des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles’, in: *Le petit peuple dans l’occident médiéval. Terminologies, perceptions, réalités*, ed. P. Bolognioni, R. Delort and C. Gauvard (Paris, 2002), 180–4.

³² About divisions in Italian medieval society: E. Crouzet-Pavan, *Enfers et paradis. L’Italie de Dante et de Giotto* (Paris, 2001), 121–62.

³³ The classic study remains F. Blockmans, *Het Gentsche stadspatriciaat tot omstreeks 1302* (Antwerp, 1938).

³⁴ About 50 per cent or more of the working population was active in the textile industry; W. Prevenier, ‘La démographie des villes du comté de Flandre aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles. Etat de la question. Essai d’interprétation’, *Revue du Nord*, 65 (1983), 256–8.

³⁵ Blockmans, ‘The impact’, 260.

³⁶ A. Leguai, ‘Les troubles urbains dans le nord de la France à la fin du XIII^e et au début du XIV^e siècle’, *Revue d’Histoire Economique et Sociale*, 54 (1976), 281 and Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 59–65: in France revolts occurred in Rouen, Laon, Calais, Arras and Saint-Quentin.

³⁷ Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 53–90.

³⁸ Leguai, ‘Les troubles urbains’, 281; G. Espinas, *La vie urbaine de Douai au moyen âge*, I (Paris, 1913), 226–69; F. Brassart, ‘Emeute des tisserands, 1280 (vers le mois d’octobre)’ and ‘Emeute contre les marchands de blé du 28 octobre 1322’, *Souvenirs de la Flandre Wallonne*, 2^e série, III, 1882, 123–9 and 133–41; W. Prevenier, ‘Conscience’, 184–5; M. Boone, ‘Social conflicts in the cloth industry of Ypres (late 13th – early 14th centuries): the Cockerulle reconsidered’, in: *Ypres and the medieval cloth industry in Flanders. Archaeological and historical contributions*, ed. M. Dewilde, A. Eryvynck and A. Wielemans (Ypres, 1998), 147–55; A. Bardoel, ‘The urban uprising at Bruges, 1280–81. Some new findings about the rebels and the partisans’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 72 (1994), 761–91.

1274, the textile workers of Ghent went on strike. In 1280, a general revolt of labourers spread out all over the county. Disruption of international trade, as in the case of the wool trade with England in the 1270s, could provoke merchants to join in rebellions. Scholars also have described similar revolts in Tournai in 1279–81, Saint-Omer in 1280–3, the Ypres *Cockerulle* in 1281, the Bruges *Moerlemaye* in 1280–1281, and Ghent in 1280.

While the rebellions around 1280 all had their specific features, the general recession in commerce and industry explains their simultaneity.³⁹ However, political questions were foremost in the demands of the rebels, who were lead by *nouveaux riches*.⁴⁰ During all these revolts rebels protested against two objectionable practices, namely financial excesses, in the form of heavy taxation, exploitation of the people's goods and work, corruption, and misgovernment of the regime in the form of arbitrary policies, unfair judging, improper use of coercive means, violation of rights and so on.⁴¹ Rising taxes always inflame people with anger during unfavourable economic periods,⁴² but being a part of the commune and paying taxes for its government, the working citizen was more concerned that his commune be well-governed. Citizens denounced the unjust division and improper use of taxes by the city oligarchs, not the taxes themselves. The taxes weighed more heavily on those in the population that had the most meagre resources, and this was a source of discontent.⁴³ In a further stage, the rebels required direct control over the city finances and the urban policy through political representation.⁴⁴ In several towns, as in Damme in 1280, dissatisfied citizens, well aware of the fiscal mechanisms that favoured the rich, succeeded in contacting the Flemish count, who saw a chance to diminish the particular power of the city oligarchs.⁴⁵

In 1302, the self-conscious middle-class found allies in rich burghers who had been deprived of a place in the urban government, and also in the count, who faced an aggressive annexation of his county by the French king. The latter, in his turn, was supported by the patrician families of the cities. The outcome of the exceptional synchronism of conflicts is well known. The French army was humiliated at the famous battle of Courtrai in July 1302 – an event that shook the medieval world – and craft-guilds took over power and established themselves as an important part of the body politic within the major Flemish cities.⁴⁶ Considering its scale and depth and its repercussions in the surrounding principalities, Blockmans judges the 1302 wave to have been a real social and political revolution, perhaps the first in Europe.⁴⁷ According to the terminology we use, speaking of a 'revolution' is perhaps an overstatement, but the crucial importance of the events of 1302 cannot be underestimated. The installation of permanent guild representation in government, broadened the base for the exercise

³⁹ C. Wyffels, 'Nieuwe gegevens betreffende de XIIIde eeuwse 'demokratische' stedelijke opstand: de Brugse 'Moerlemaye' (1280–1281)', *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire* [hereafter: BCRH], 132 (1966), 43.

⁴⁰ As was studied in Bruges: *ibid.*, 57 and Bardoel, 'The urban uprising', *passim*. About these *homines novi* in Ghent: R. Märtins, *Wertorientierungen und wirtschaftliches Erfolgsstreben mittelalterlicher Grosskaufleute. Das Beispiel Gent im 13. Jahrhundert* (Köln, 1976).

⁴¹ R. Barth, *Argumentation und Selbstverständnis der Bürgeropposition in städtischen Auseinandersetzungen des Spätmittelalters* (Köln, 1974), 348.

⁴² G. Ardant, *Théorie sociologique de l'impot*, II (Paris, 1965), 728.

⁴³ R. Hilton, 'Révoltes rurales et révoltes urbaines au moyen âge', in: *Révolte et société*, vol. II (Paris, 1989), 28.

⁴⁴ Wyffels, 'Nieuwe gegevens', 104–7.

⁴⁵ A. de Smet, 'De klacht van de 'ghemeente' van Damme in 1280. Enkele gegevens over politieke en sociale toestanden in een kleine Vlaamse stad gedurende de tweede helft der XIIIde eeuw', BCRH, 15 (1950), 9.

⁴⁶ M. Boone, 'Une société urbanisée sous tension. Le comté de Flandre vers 1302', in: *1302. Le désastre de Courtrai. Faits et mythes de la bataille des Eperons d'Or*, ed. R.C. Van Caenegem (Antwerp, 2002), 27–77.

⁴⁷ Blockmans, 'The impact', 261. In the surrounding principalities Holland, Brabant and Liège, the Flemish revolt provoked revolts of artisans demanding the same social and political rights (Blickle, *Unruhen*, 54).

of power in Flemish cities for more than two centuries. Craft guilds became a powerful lobby in the urban environment.⁴⁸ We argue that the manifest fiscal injustice of the patrician city government was not in fact the fundamental cause of conflict in this second phase of urban rebelliousness. There was a vivid dissatisfaction with the oligarchic character of city policy that only awaited a spark to ignite the fire.⁴⁹ But it was the latent socio-political inequality, aggravated by economic evolution, that was the main reason for the conflicts. Gaining access to the polity and control of the financial resources of the city was the foremost objective of the rebels.

4. The era of the ‘city-state’

Financial pressure, caused by the heavy taxation on the county after the disadvantageous peace settlement of Athis-sur-Orge with France in June 1305, and growing economic malaise⁵⁰ weighed on the united front of the craft guilds and their allies. In the third phase of Flemish rebellion, from 1305 to 1360, the era of the so-called ‘city state’, unity disintegrated. Struggles for power deluged the county, on the one hand, between guilds, who fought each other with a vital political consciousness fed by their military power that was discovered on the battlefield of Courtrai in 1302, and, on the other hand, between guilds and patricians who wanted to regain their political power.⁵¹ Revolts took place in Saint-Omer in 1306,⁵² in Ghent in 1304, 1311 and 1313,⁵³ in Ypres in 1303-4,⁵⁴ in Bruges in 1309-10 and in Aardenburg in 1309-11.⁵⁵

For the contenders, participation in power and control over city resources, specifically the economic and financial management of the city, was crucial. This included determining tax levies, market regulations, price and wage levels and working conditions.⁵⁶ The economic difficulties of the fourteenth century just heightened the latent tensions within guilds containing different social groups. These battles could be vivid because craftsmen who worked for the local market had other interests than those who produced for international trade. The former wanted political stability and stable prices to sell their commodities. The latter were much more dependent on international politics and on the prices of raw materials. They also lived in greater concentrations and were thus more ‘proletarianised’. A classic example is the

⁴⁸ P. Stabel, ‘Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 30 (2004), 187-92 and A. Black, *Guild & state. European political thought from the twelfth century to the present* (New Brunswick, 2003), 66-75.

⁴⁹ An analysis of fifteenth-century revolts against governmental taxes in France led to the same conclusions: A. Leguai, ‘Emeutes et troubles d’origine fiscale pendant le règne de Louis XI’, *Le moyen âge*, 73 (1967), 447-87.

⁵⁰ Thoen, ‘A “commercial survival economy”’, 111-38.

⁵¹ A somewhat outdated overview, in: P. Rogghé, ‘Gemeente ende vrient. Nationale omwentelingen in de XIVe eeuw’, *Handelingen van het Historisch Genootschap te Brugge* [hereafter: *HGGB*], 89 (1952), 103.

⁵² G. Hennequin, ‘La révolte des bourgeois de Saint-Omer de 1306, et ses conséquences’, *Bulletin trimestriel de la Société Académique des Antiquaires de la Morinie*, 18, 345 (1955), 417-44.

⁵³ V. Fris, ‘Les origines de la réforme constitutionnelle de Gand de 1360-1369’, *Annales du XXe congrès de la fédération archéologique et historique de la Belgique*, 3 (1907), 428 and M. Boone, ‘Het ‘charter van Senlis’ (november 1301) voor de stad Gent. Een stedelijke constitutie in het spanningsveld tussen vorst en stad (met uitgave van de tekst)’, *Handelingen van de Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* [hereafter: *HMGOG*], 57 (2003), 21-3.

⁵⁴ D. Viaene, ‘De drang naar macht. De Ieperse stadsmagistraat in de veertiende eeuw (1328-1383)’, *HGGB*, 141 (2004), 13-19.

⁵⁵ C. Wyffels, ‘De oudste rekening der stad Aardenburg (1309-1310) en de opstand van 1311’, *Archief. Uitgegeven door het Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen* (1949-1950), 10-11.

⁵⁶ Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 282.

constant fighting between the weavers and the fullers, mostly over wage conflicts.⁵⁷ This social conflict was often mixed with the social and political conflicts between the textile guilds and the patricians. In Ghent, patricians and fullers on several occasions actually allied against their common enemy, the weavers. Tension also existed between small commodity producers, who possessed their own means of production, and the wage labourers, journeymen or poor guild-masters, who had to sell their labour power to other masters. These contradictions help to explain the frequency and the intensity of the battles for power in major textile centres, as in Ghent 13 times between 1311 and 1375.⁵⁸ At the beginning of the Hundred Years War, between 1337 and 1345, Ghent was ruled by the dean of the weavers, Jacob van Artevelde, who sought international aid to install his autocratic regime throughout the county. He found it especially with the English king who was at that time made king of France. Similarly, Bruges merchants might have favoured the revolt of 1323–1328 because they feared count Louis would not maintain good commercial relations with England.⁵⁹

We consider the ‘peasants revolt’ of Maritime Flanders (1323–1328) as a partly urban rebellion because it was not purely rural. Facing fiscal pressure and a growing socio-political inequality, a real coalition between powerless citizens and peasants developed. Bruges joined the peasant rebels and so did hundreds of Ghent weavers who were subsequently sent into exile. Not only did major cities like Ypres and Courtrai at some point join in, but also from at least the beginning of 1324, the commoners of some smaller towns also participated in the rising.⁶⁰ The revolt thus spread ‘like a plague’. In 1325 the rebels, now clearly uniting peasants and burghers from many cities including Bruges and Ypres, held most of the county and managed to force count Louis, at that time a prisoner in Bruges, to make Robert of Cassel regent of Flanders. Robert was an opportunistic nobleman, uncle to the count, making common cause with the revolt to increase his personal power.⁶¹ This was one of the instances when Flemish rebels managed to form an alternative government, appoint their own functionaries and create a truly ‘revolutionary’ situation of dual power. It seems, however, that the countrymen had more radical demands and really intended to overthrow the existing social order in the countryside, whereas the burghers did not and were more eager to compromise when the situation seemed lost after a French intervention to support the powerless count.⁶²

⁵⁷ Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 19–28; G. Espinas and H. Pirenne, *Recueil de documents relatifs à l'histoire de l'industrie drapière en Flandre: des origines à l'époque bourguignonne* (Brussels, 1906), II, 402, 533–7, III, 740–4; a similar rebellion took place in Douai in 1322: M. Howell, ‘Achieving the guild effect without guilds: crafts and craftsmen in late medieval Douai’, in: *Les métiers au moyen âge. Aspects économiques et sociaux*, ed. P. Lambrechts and J.-P. Sosson (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1993), 110–11. More general: C. Sieg’l, *Arbeitskämpfe seit dem Spätmittelalter* (Köln, 1993).

⁵⁸ In 1311, 1313, 1319, 1325–6, 1328, 1337, 1345, 1347, 1349, 1353, 1359, 1361 and 1373. D. Nicholas, *The Van Arteveldes of Ghent: the varieties of the vendetta and the hero in history* (Leiden, 1988); H. Lucas, *The Low Countries and the Hundred Years' War, 1326–1347* (Ann Arbor, 1929); Fris, ‘Les origines’, passim; M. Boone and H. Brand, ‘Vollersoproeren en collectieve actie in Gent en Leiden in de 14^e en 15^e eeuw’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 19 (1993), 168–93; J. Vuylsteke, ‘De Goede Disendach’, 13 Januari 1349, *HMGOG*, 1 (1894), 9–47.

⁵⁹ Te Brake, *A Plague*, 74.

⁶⁰ J. Sabbe, ‘De opstand van Brugge tegen Graaf Robrecht van Bethune en zijn zoon Robrecht van Kassel in 1321–1322. Het laatste politieke optreden van de volksleiders Pieter de Coninc en Jan Breidel’, *HGGB*, 107 (1970), 236–47; id., *Vlaanderen in opstand, 1323–1328: Nikolaas Zannekin, Zeger Janszone en Willem de Deken* (Bruges, 1992), 22, 60–1 and Te Brake, *A Plague*, passim.

⁶¹ Te Brake, *A Plague*, 86.

⁶² Te Brake, *A Plague*, 87. Contrary to what was claimed in older historiography, Challet has shown that among the Tuchin-movement in the Languedoc (1381–1384) there were also urban elements involved, especially artisans. The Tuchin-rebels organised in both rural and urban networks of sociability. Here too, urban rebels were quicker to negotiate with the monarchy than their rural counterparts who were far more radical: V. Challet, ‘La révolte des Tuchins: banditisme spécial ou sociabilité villageoise?’, *Médiévales*, 34 (1998), 106–8.

To an even greater degree than the city of Bruges in 1323–28, Jacob van Artevelde worked out an alternative model to monarchical centralisation, paralleling the Northern Italian cities, but to a lesser degree. His model conceptualised a state organisation based on the autonomous power of the great cities, dominating the surrounding countryside to guarantee the economic interests of the guilds. The firm guild structure, based on corporate solidarity, generated a political culture of ‘pre-republicanism’ in the powerful cities who wanted to rule the urban space by themselves.⁶³ Their core position in the European economic system provided the cities such an abundance of resources that the princes had no other choice but to leave them an extensive autonomy.⁶⁴ However, Jacob van Artevelde was politically finished when the crucial English aid fell away, and he became a victim of rivalries within his own town. The count supported former patricians who expelled the weavers from the city. But in 1359, a year after the Parisian revolt led by Etienne Marcel, a general weavers’ revolt spread over the county. In Bruges, Ypres and Ghent, the weavers fought to re-enter the city government.⁶⁵ Frightened by this ‘national’ revolt in his dominion, the count had to confirm the weavers’ power in the main cities again. And thus the power of the city-states strengthened.⁶⁶

5. Altering balances of power

The time in which the weak counts of Flanders were mere spectators on the sidelines of the political arena came to an end in the fourth period of Flemish urban rebellions (1379–1453). The eve of this phase, the Ghent War (1379–1385), exhibited several similarities to revolts and rebellions in preceding years. It coincided chronologically with a wave of socio-political rebellions in Europe that Mollat and Wolff called *les années révolutionnaires*. Though there was no strict synchronism and the events certainly had a different character in different regions. Many parts of Europe witnessed revolts in those years, the most famous of which are the English Peasants Revolt of 1381 and the revolt of the *Ciompi* in Florence.⁶⁷ In the Ghent war, which spread all over the county, a new Artevelde, Philip, son of Jacob, stood up to the count, once again with the support of English troops. But the alliance of guilds from several towns was not successful this time. In 1380, some Bruges weavers who supported the Ghent rebels were quickly crushed by the Bruges patricians and by craftsmen working for the local markets.⁶⁸ After the battle of Beverhoutsveld (1382), a victory for the Ghent rebel troops over the Bruges militia, a revolutionary craft guild regime took power also in Ypres, but only for a short time.⁶⁹

⁶³ M. Boone, ‘La construction d’un républicanisme urbain. Enjeux de la politique municipale dans les villes flamandes au bas moyen âge’, in: *Enjeux et expressions de la politique municipale (XIIe–XXe siècles)*, ed. D. Menjot and J.-L. Pinol (Paris, 1997), 41–60 and H. Schilling, ‘Civic republicanism in late medieval and early modern cities’, in: H. Schilling, *Religion, political culture and the emergence of early modern society* (Leyde, 1992), 3–60.

⁶⁴ Blockmans, ‘Alternatives’, 152 and id., ‘Voracious states’, 737.

⁶⁵ Vuylsteke, ‘De Goede disendach’, 44–6; Fris, ‘Les origines’, 446–50; J. Mertens, ‘Woelingen te Brugge tussen 1359 en 1361’, in: *Album Carlos Wyffels* (Brussels, 1987), 325–30.

⁶⁶ W. Prevenier and M. Boone, ‘The City-State Dream (1300–1500)’, in: *Ghent. In defence of a rebellious city: history, art, culture*, ed. J. Decavele (Antwerp, 1989), 85–93.

⁶⁷ Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 139–42; A. Stella, *La révolte des Ciompi: les hommes, les lieux, le travail* (Paris, 1993); *The English rising of 1381*, ed. R. Hilton and T. Aston (Cambridge, 1984).

⁶⁸ R. De Muynck, ‘De Gentse oorlog (1379–1385). Oorzaken en karakter’, *HMGOG*, 5 (1951), 305–18 and J. Mertens, ‘Twee weversopstanden te Brugge (1387–1391)’, *HGGB*, 110 (1973), 6–7.

⁶⁹ In general, of all the big cities, the guilds in Ypres were in the weakest position vis-à-vis the patricians. The only periods they managed to be strongly represented in the urban government was during the revolutionary periods of 1325–1328, 1338–1348, 1359–1361 and 1382: Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 57–8.

The economic landscape had changed. In the face of trade difficulties and foreign competitors, Flemish merchants and entrepreneurs had successfully transformed the structure of the textile industry. After the severe crisis of the fourteenth century, the production of luxury goods and the so-called ‘new’ and ‘light drapery’ had replaced the industrial production of the ‘heavy drapery’.⁷⁰ The fullers became less important in the production of drapery and, as a consequence, their political power fell away.⁷¹ On the contrary, the weavers still remained a politically conscious group, ready to answer attacks on their rights, as happened in 1387 and 1391 in Bruges, and in 1428–29 in Ypres.⁷² The fragmentation of the economic landscape into a wider range of medium-sized guilds, and the declining industrial production of textile goods consequently divided economic interests from reasons to rebel.

Moreover, in Ghent and Bruges from about 1360, a balance of power developed between the different guilds, which was reflected in more-or-less fixed systems for the division of economic and socio-political functions within the city.⁷³ Rebellion was no longer necessary to fulfil political demands, because representatives of the guilds took part in city government. Formerly powerless craftsmen could now demand political changes in legal ways. Especially in the fifteenth century, small elites of the more well-off guild masters monopolised the political functions inside the guilds and the city government.⁷⁴ Social divisions had grown deeper, and were still widening under the pressure of the major political evolution of the late middle ages, the formation of modern states. As in the Ghent war of 1379–85, in the Bruges revolts of 1411 and 1436–38, and in the Ghent revolts of 1401, 1406, 1411, 1414, 1423, 1432, 1437, 1440 and 1449–53, the Flemish craft guilds opposed their count, who was now the powerful duke of Burgundy. The Burgundian dynasty established a sophisticated and effective, albeit short-lived, state in the medieval Low Countries.⁷⁵ The duke’s programme for centralisation included the construction and strengthening of central judicial institutions, particularly the Council of Flanders as an appeal court for the local city aldermen, and the undermining of the power of the ‘Four Members of Flanders’ as a representative institution with the power to approve taxation. The Burgundian state gradually concentrated coercive power by skimming off more and more of the financial means of its subjects and through growing co-option of pro-ducual social and political networks among the urban political elites. In 1385, the Burgundian duke still had to accept a *modus vivendi* with rebellious

⁷⁰ M. Boone, ‘L’industrie textile à Gand au bas moyen âge ou les ressources successives d’une activité réputée moribonde’, in: *La draperie ancienne des Pays-Bas. Débouchés et stratégies de survie, 14e-16e siècles*, ed. M. Boone and W. Prevenier (Louvain, 1993), 15–61; J. Dambruyne, *Mensen en centen. Het 16de eeuwse Gent in demografisch en economisch perspectief* (Ghent, 2001), 356–63; M. Howell and M. Boone, ‘Becoming early modern in the late medieval Low Countries. Ghent and Douai from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century’, *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 306–11; Stabel, *Dwarfs*, 138–58 and – more general – H. Van der Wee, ‘Industrial dynamics and the process of urbanization and deurbanization from the late middle ages to the eighteenth century. A synthesis’, in: *The rise and decline of urban industries in Italy and in the Low Countries (late middle ages – early modern times)*, ed. H. Van der Wee (Louvain, 1988), 307–81.

⁷¹ Boone and Brand, ‘Vollersoproeren’, 192–3 and Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 44–6.

⁷² Mertens, ‘Twee weversopstanden’ and I. Diegerick, *Les drapiers yprois et la conspiration manquée. Episode de l’histoire d’Ypres (1428–1429)* (Bruges, 1856).

⁷³ M. Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen, ca. 1384 – ca. 1453. Een sociaal-politieke studie van een staatsvormingsproces* (Brussels, 1990), passim; Mertens, ‘Woelingen’, 325–6; Boone and Prak, ‘Rulers’, 106.

⁷⁴ Boone, *Gent*, 58–93.

⁷⁵ W. Blockmans, ‘Princes conquérants et bourgeois calculateurs. Le poids des réseaux urbains dans la formation des Etats’, in: *La ville, la bourgeoisie et la genèse de l’état moderne (XIIe–XVIIIe s.)*, ed. N. Bulst and J.-Ph. Genet (Paris, 1988), 167–80; W. Blockmans and W. Prevenier, *The promised lands: the Low Countries under Burgundian rule, 1369–1530* (Philadelphia, 1999); Boone, *Gent*; J. Dumolyn, *Staatsvorming en vorstelijke ambtenaren in het graafschap Vlaanderen (1419–1477)* (Antwerp, 2003).

Ghent as the price for becoming count of Flanders, but Burgundian rule strengthened with the acquisition of new territories in the Netherlands. Once its power was consolidated, the growing ambitions of the ducal state increasingly came into open conflict with parts of the elites and with the urban guilds in the last fortresses of rebellion.⁷⁶ This was clearly shown during the bitter but ultimately failed revolts of Bruges in 1436–1438 and Ghent in 1449–1453.

In the course of these revolts, the craftsmen contested not only the centralising policies of the Burgundian state, but also the decrease in their participation in city politics. Narrower groups of city elites increasingly made the decisions, and the prince and his influential court attracted and recruited these elites to defend the state's ambitions. In most cities this policy worked smoothly, and fifteenth-century political elites became much more docile than their forerunners had been. Unlike the middle class and the common craftsmen, the city oligarchs were less dependent on the urban privileges to ensure their economic wealth and political power. They thus undermined the corporate solidarity of the city which they were supposed to represent.⁷⁷ Even the political heads of the guilds took the opportunity to gain personal profit from their position as the privileged suppliers of materials or services for the city. Frustrated members of the urban elites who had not been approached by the duke could forge an alliance with the powerless craftsmen to contest their declining representation in the urban government. But because of intra-urban rivalries, a lack of support by other challengers to the state and the overwhelming strength of such a powerful enemy, rebellious alliances of citizens did not succeed in bringing back the good times when guilds and local potentates independently decided urban policies.⁷⁸ Remarkably, during the Burgundian period, his subjects never questioned the authority of the prince. After all, he remained the natural and legitimate lord badly advised by evil councillors. His subjects often had the perception, sometimes rightly, that it was not the duke but his corrupt officials and the bribed city oligarchs who were to blame for the burden of taxation, or misled him into revoking urban privileges.

6. The final outburst of crisis

The outcome of the socio-political battle was predictable. Because of their investments in social and political capital, more specifically by marrying into noble families, acquiring feudal land and holding princely offices, an increasing part of the urban political elite was prepared to give up the political autonomy of the city for the consolidation of their personal ambitions.⁷⁹ In the long run these 'dangerous liaisons' between city elites and prince were solid enough to handle the resistance of the lower social groups. In this fifth phase, 1467–1540, only in moments of structural weakness in state power could rebel coalitions hold firm. In 1467, during the inauguration of

⁷⁶ Boone and Prak, 'Rulers', 107.

⁷⁷ Blockmans, 'The impact', 270.

⁷⁸ W. Blockmans, *De volksvertegenwoordiging in Vlaanderen in de overgang van Middeleeuwen naar nieuwe tijden (1384–1506)* (Brussels, 1978), 588–92; Boone, *Gent*, 238–42; Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 335–44; Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 423–36.

⁷⁹ Blockmans, 'Voracious states', 753; Ch. Tilly, 'Warmaking and statemaking as organized crime', in: *Bringing the state back in*, ed. D. Rueschemeyer, T. Skocpol and P. Evans (Cambridge, 1985), 169–91; J. Dumolyn, 'Investeren in Sociaal Kapitaal. Netwerken en sociale transacties van Bourgondische ambtenaren', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 28 (2002), 417–38.

Charles the Bold as the new count, a violent rebellion of the Ghent middle class erupted, and the furious prince responded with a heavy hand.⁸⁰ After Duke Charles' death in 1477, a tight collaboration between expelled city elites, middle classes and common craftsmen came to power in the major cities. The repressive measures and the autocratic policy of the duke and his confidants were undone by a sudden and violent attack.⁸¹ However, in spite of rebellions in Bruges and Sluis in September 1477, and in Ghent in February 1479, representatives of the central state could gradually take over power again.⁸² However, after the death of his daughter Mary of Burgundy, in 1482, the Burgundian state — which now fell into Habsburg hands with the succession of her husband Maximilian of Austria — faced a serious alternative. Military aid of the French king helped the frustrated elites, middle classes and common craftsmen of all three major Flemish cities plus many nobles to resist openly the autocratic regime of Maximilian, who was portrayed as an unjust and perverse count. Consequently, the representatives of the three Members of Flanders chose regents for his son, Philip the Fair, whom they considered the true count of Flanders. Once again, local authorities were empowered to decide all matters, and enabled decision-making on the higher levels. To summarise: the age-old custom of 'pre-republicanism' was introduced in a monarchical model.⁸³

As in the revolts of 1128, 1323–1328 and 1339–1345, a strong coalition resisted state power. Against this 'popular front' any centralising institution would have to muster an equally formidable coalition of its own. The Roman king Maximilian himself had to start a counter revolt in 1485 to regain political power in the cities. But his claim to power was not broadly based, and after the Ghent revolt in November 1487 and the Bruges revolt in January 1488, rebels imprisoned the king in Bruges. To capture the Roman King himself was to do the unthinkable.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, internal rivalries, weaker than expected foreign aid, an economic blockade of the surrounding countries, and the huge financial and especially military reserves of Maximilian finished the resistance of the coalition. Bruges capitulated first in January, and finally in December 1490; Ghent surrendered in July 1492; and Philip of Cleves, the most rebellious nobleman, held out in Sluis until October 1492.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ P. Arnade, 'Secular charisma, sacred power: rites of rebellion in the Ghent entry of 1467', *HMGOG*, 45 (1991), 69–94; M. Boone, 'Législation communale et ingérence princière: la 'restriction' de Charles le Téméraire pour la ville de Gand (13 juillet 1468)', in: *Faire bans, edictz et statuz'. Légiférer dans la ville médiévale. Sources, objets, acteurs de l'activité législative communale en Occident, ca. 1200–1500*, ed. J.-M. Cauchies and E. Bousmar (Brussels, 2001), 139–51; Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 415–6.

⁸¹ 1477. *Le privilège général et les privilèges régionaux de Marie de Bourgogne pour les Pays-Bas*, ed. W. Blockmans (Courtrai-Heule, 1985); F. Hugenholtz, 'The 1477 crisis in the Burgundian duke's dominions', in: *Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. J. Bromley and E. Kossman (Groningen, 1964), 33–46; H. Koenigsberger, 'Fürst und Generalstaaten: Maximilian I. in den Niederlanden (1477–1493)', *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCXLII (1986), 557–79; id., *Monarchies, States Generals and parliaments. The Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Cambridge, 2001), 42–72; M. Boone, 'La justice en spectacle. La justice urbaine en Flandre et la crise du pouvoir 'bourguignon' (1477–1488)', *Revue Historique*, 125 (2003), 43–65.

⁸² V. Fris, 'L'émeute de février 1479 à Gand', *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Gand*, 17 (1909), 179–197 and A. Janssens, 'Macht en onmacht van de Brugse schepenvbank in de periode 1477–1490', *HGGB*, 133 (1996), 5–45.

⁸³ W. Blockmans, 'Autocratie ou polyarchie? La lutte pour le pouvoir politique en Flandre de 1482 à 1492 d'après des documents inédits', *BCRH*, 140 (1974), 257–368.

⁸⁴ R. Wellens, 'La révolte brugeoise de 1488', *HGGB*, 102 (1966), 29–30 and J. Haemers & E. Lecuppre-Desjardin, 'Conquérir et reconquérir l'espace urbain. Le triomphe de la collectivité sur l'individu dans le cadre de la révolte brugeoise de 1488', in: *Groupes sociaux & territoires urbains du moyen âge au 16^e siècle*, ed. C. Billen and C. Deligne (Turnhout, 2006), in press.

⁸⁵ A. De Fouw, *Philips van Kleef. Een bijdrage tot de kennis van zijn leven en karakter* (Groningen, 1937) and *Philippe de Clèves: homme politique et bibliophile (1456–1528)*, ed. J. Haemers, C. Van Hoorebeeck and H. Wijsman (Turnhout, 2006), in press.

The repressive measures of the state managed to break open resistance until 1515, when the Ghent guilds contacted Philip of Cleves to disrupt the inauguration of the new count Charles.⁸⁶ The repressive reaction of the Emperor could not prevent a new revolt against his financial and military policy in 1537–39, put down by extremely harsh repression in 1540.⁸⁷ However, the rebellious tradition of the county of Flanders was not exhausted. Partly because of the influence of religious factors, the revolts of the second half of the sixteenth century opened a sixth phase of revolt (1566–1584). In itself, however, the religious factor was not new, because during the Great Schism of 1378–1415 it was already an issue in the Ghent war.⁸⁸ Moreover, the behaviour and background of the urban rebels of sixteenth-century Ghent who took up arms against Philip II of Spain, did not break new ground.⁸⁹ In a vacuum of princely authority in 1576–7, a city coalition made up a programme for the whole county that implemented the formation of a city-state system, bringing the county once again under the control of the three big cities, Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. Iwein of Alost's words of 1128, echoed more vividly than ever when the General Estates of the Low Countries enacted an 'Act of Abandonment' in 1581, by which they deposed the 'lawless and faithless prince'.⁹⁰

7. Coalitions and leadership

In what follows we try to retrieve structural elements and patterns in medieval rebelliousness in the Flemish cities, namely (1) coalitions and leadership of rebels, (2) their interests and ideology, and (3) their mobilisation and *repertoire*. First of all, forging coalitions and alliances was crucial to the rebels. If groups or individuals wanted to gain political power, they could first try to approach the ruling political networks. If these networks did not fulfil the contender(s)' demands, ambitious individuals could form a coalition with other frustrated challengers. Initially, they would try to enter the ruling networks without violence.⁹¹ If the possibilities for a group to attain political involvement were limited, for example in the case of the craft guilds in the 1280s, contenders for power could seek to become members of the polity through collective action.⁹² If this collective action used *violence* to gain power, we speak of a rebellion. The central element in violence is coercion, including an imminent threat,⁹³ that would force the elites to satisfy rebel demands.

'Coalition' is the key word in a rebellion. People rebel when acting together. The *Moerlemaye* revolt of Bruges (1280–1281), for example, shows that the simple opposition between 'commoners' and 'patricians' was not always so clear cut.⁹⁴ Revolts cannot be simply reduced to the antagonisms mentioned in the introduction. In every urban rebellion in medieval Flanders, the centre (count and king), patricians, nobles, craftsmen and even peasants formed

⁸⁶ J. Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middengroepen. Aspiraties, relaties en transformaties in de 16^{de}-eeuwse Gentse ambachtswereld* (Ghent, 2002), 614–6.

⁸⁷ Id., 'De middenstand in opstand. Corporatieve aspiraties en transformaties in het zestiende-eeuwse Gent', *HMGOG*, 57 (2003), 71–122; J. Decavele and P. Van Peteghem, 'Ghent, 'absolutely' broken', in: *Ghent*, 107–13; W. Blockmans, *Keizer Karel V, 1500–1558: de utopie van het keizerschap* (Louvain, 2000), passim; M. Boone, 'Le dict mal s'est espandu comme peste fatale'. Karel V en Gent, stedelijke identiteit en staatsgeweld', *HMGOG*, 54 (2000), 31–63 and *Charles V in context*, passim.

⁸⁸ Boone and Prak, 'Rulers', 112–3.

⁸⁹ Dambruyne, 'De middenstand', 109–15.

⁹⁰ Blockmans, 'Alternatives', 145–6 and id. and P. Van Peteghem, 'De Pacificatie van Gent als uiting van continuïteit in de politieke opvattingen van de standenvertegenwoordiging', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 89 (1976), 322–34.

⁹¹ Tilly, *From mobilization*, 126.

⁹² Ibid., 133.

⁹³ Zagorin, *Rebels and rulers*, I, 18.

⁹⁴ Wyffels, 'Nieuwe gegevens', 38.

ever-changing coalitions to gain political power.⁹⁵ Facing united groups, power holders easily lost their political support to an alternative body that claimed the city's public space and tried to gain control over coercive powers by replacing the current membership of the city magistracy as the only institution that reflected public authority. Examples of allied forces are numerous in the above survey. The opposition of the period 1280–1302, for example, was a heterogeneous class coalition, a united front of textile workers, middle class artisans and politically frustrated *homines novi*.⁹⁶ Studying a wide range of late medieval urban revolts in Germany, Czok concluded that broader layers of burghers than just the craft guilds participated in united fronts (*Bürgeropposition*) in a struggle for city government and economic power in general, though with a clearly limited reformist character.⁹⁷ Rebellion occurred on a broader scale if the urban elite fragmented into different interest groups. Economic interests, network alliances, or political frustration could unite members of the political and economic elites with dissatisfied craft guilds. Efforts to achieve a more effective central control could weaken older political bonds and sometimes alienated significant elements of the urban ruling classes.⁹⁸ Coalitions between guilds could go beyond the city walls, as happened in 1360 (see above). There is even proof that rebels from different cities also formed networks of their own. After the 1323–1328 revolt, an anonymous Bruges rebel told the officers charged with the investigation that he had ties with other rebels of the city of Geraardsbergen who had brought him into contact with the Ghent weavers.⁹⁹ Noblemen could also divide if a structural crisis threatened the dynasty, as in 1477, when several nobles joined the French king or, as in 1483–85, the Flemish rebels.¹⁰⁰

Leadership of noblemen like Robert of Cassel during the revolt of maritime Flanders or Philip of Cleves at the end of the fifteenth century gave rebellions additional legitimacy, but these men quickly turned their backs on the rebels when defeat was imminent, since they mostly acted from opportunistic self-interest. Leading rebels always searched for one or more charismatic persons who were to be the compromise figures between several groups and became the leader(s) of the rebellion. As elsewhere in western Europe, rebel leaders mostly originated from the higher classes of society: noblemen, rich merchants, or — in the case of a rural rebellion — wealthy peasants took the lead.¹⁰¹ Members of the elites had the background, the capital and, sometimes, the political experience to be capable

⁹⁵ In many Italian cities as well, popular coalitions managed to break into government by means of revolts before the 1320s and 1330s; L. Martines, 'Political violence in the thirteenth century', in: *Violence and civil disorder in Italian cities, 1200–1500*, ed. L. Martines (Berkeley, 1972), 332 and Ph. Jones, *The Italian city-state. From commune to signoria* (Oxford, 1997), 588–96.

⁹⁶ Prevenier, 'Conscience', 176 and Wyffels, 'Nieuwe gegevens', 72, 85.

⁹⁷ K. Czok, 'Zur Volksbewegung in den deutschen Städten des 14. Jahrhunderts. Bürgerkämpfe und antikuriale Opposition', in: *Städtische Volksbewegungen im 14. Jahrhundert*, ed. E. Engelmann (Berlin, 1960), 157–69; using a different terminology E. Maschke, 'Verfassung und soziale Kräfte in der deutschen Stadt des späten Mittelalters, vornehmlich in Oberdeutschland', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 46 (1959), 289–649 stressed that even dissident patricians sometimes joined the rebellions.

⁹⁸ R. Forster and J. Greene, 'Introduction', in: *Preconditions of revolution in early modern Europe*, ed. R. Forster and J. Greene (London, 1970), 14.

⁹⁹ Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 83–90; De Pauw, 'L'enquête de Bruges après la bataille de Cassel: document inédits publiés', *BCRH*, 68 (1899), 670–1.

¹⁰⁰ W. Blockmans, 'La position du comté de Flandre dans le royaume à la fin du XVe siècle', in: *La France de la fin du XVe siècle. Renouveau et apogée. Économie — Pouvoirs — Arts. Culture et conscience nationales*, ed. B. Chevalier and Ph. Contamine (Paris, 1985), 71–89.

¹⁰¹ Bercé, *Révoltes*, 252; Johnson, 'Revolutionary change', 15; Leguai, 'Émeutes', 484; Rotz, 'Social struggles', 67; Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 131.

leaders. For the rebellious networks, the leader was an instrument to control the masses. For the guilds, the leader became a symbol of fair resistance to evil; he was supposed to change the course of events.¹⁰² In Ghent, Jacob van Artevelde became the archetype of the rebel leader. In every subsequent revolt rebels referred to his success and his charisma if their leaders did not fulfil their wishes.¹⁰³ Artevelde, from a wealthy merchant family, can in this respect be compared to Etienne Marcel, *prévôt des marchands* of Paris and leader of the rebels of 1356–1358, who sought an alliance with the revolting peasants of the *Jacquerie*.¹⁰⁴ Pieter de Coninck, a great public speaker and leader of the Bruges revolt of 1302, said to be a poor weaver, was a notable exception to this general rule of elite descent. At all events, the position of a rebel leader was risky. If he did not succeed, his fate lay in the hands of the different rebellious networks and factions. If they needed a scapegoat for a lost battle or a lightning rod for dissatisfied guilds, the leader was sacrificed. On one occasion in 1302, Pieter De Coninck was chased out of Bruges. Ghent rebel leader Lieven Boone was decapitated after a lost battle in 1452, and even Jacob van Artevelde was murdered by competing networks in 1345.¹⁰⁵

The most dramatic expressions of urban political power happened when towns as a whole joined in leagues or alliances, which collectively had far more resources at their disposal than a single prince.¹⁰⁶ And when nobles and even members of the court sympathised, dynastic power was temporarily overcome, as happened, for example, during the periods of the ‘regency-council’ in 1483–85 and 1488–90.¹⁰⁷ But princely power always had a remarkable resilience. Princes had a far more legitimate position than the rebellious opposition, and they could fall back on a greater experience and tradition of governing. Furthermore, as the state formation process progressed under Burgundian and Habsburg rule, princely reserves of power and finances became too high to resist. Usually, princes tried to tackle coalitions by using divide-and-rule tactics, setting nobles, cities and citizens against each other.¹⁰⁸ The specific urban ideology and the often diverging interests of the major cities helped the prince to keep the cities divided. Even within the town itself, rebellious coalitions mostly proved to be of short duration. In 1325, for example, a revolt by the Ghent weavers sympathising with their fellow rebels in western Flanders was defeated inside the city.¹⁰⁹ In the Ghent war of 1379–1385, the Bruges weavers were in turn the only group of their town to support the Ghent rebels. They were, however, quickly crushed in 1380.¹¹⁰ In 1436–1438, Ghent left rebellious Bruges on its own, and Bruges did not come to the aid of the Ghent revolt of 1449–1453. Both rebellions ended in bitter defeats.

Foreign aid also seemed to have been an indispensable requirement for any revolt that questioned the position of the lord, as happened in 1128, 1339–45, 1382, 1451–3 and 1477–1492. Economic interests drove the Flemish cities towards the English king, guaranteeing wool trade,

¹⁰² C. Stone, ‘Political leadership in urban politics’, in: *Theories of urban politics*, ed. D. Judge et al. (London, 1995), 97–8 and Burns, *Leadership* (New York, 1978).

¹⁰³ Boone and Prak, ‘Rulers’, 106.

¹⁰⁴ Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 119–25.

¹⁰⁵ V. Lambert, ‘Over carrière, promotie, degradatie en rehabilitatie. 700 jaar Jan Breydel en Pieter de Coninck’, in: *Omtrent 1302*, 210–16 and Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 293–6.

¹⁰⁶ Rotz, ‘Social struggles’, 78.

¹⁰⁷ Blockmans, ‘Autocratie’, 278–89 and 293–302.

¹⁰⁸ Blockmans, ‘Voracious states’, 749.

¹⁰⁹ Boone and Prevenier, ‘The city-state dream’, 84 and Sabbe, *Vlaanderen in opstand*, 47–8.

¹¹⁰ De Muyndt, ‘De Gentse oorlog’, 305–18 and Mertens, ‘Twee weversopstanden’, 6–7.

and the cities also looked for military and political aid from the French king, the suzerain of the county of Flanders.¹¹¹ However, the league between the Flemish cities and supporting kings always failed, because the kings, acting from self-interest, played a double role, and because the Flemish rebels kept their distance, not wanting to replace one centralising lord by another. Alliances with other principalities, as between the county of Flanders and the duchy of Brabant (in 1339, 1488 and 1578), or between two cities, as between Ghent and Liège (in 1381–2 and 1452), never held for long either.¹¹² And inversely, the prince sometimes had to form his own alliances with ‘foreign’ powers to defeat his subjects. In 1328 and 1382 the Flemish count needed the intervention of the French army to crush the rebellion.

In this rebellion, a rare alliance between city and countryside occurred. When the peasants of the district of Cassel rose up against ducal reforms of their customary laws (1427–1431), the people of Ghent did sympathise,¹¹³ and some urban revolts spread throughout the countryside, as did the Bruges revolt in 1436–1437.¹¹⁴ However, in the latter case, the initiative was clearly urban, and the rural communities seem to have been merely passive followers. Urban and rural interests began to diverge even more because of the urban projects for dictatorship over the rural hinterland since the Van Artevelde period, mainly for economic interests, as discussed below. In addition, during the fourteenth century the Flemish nobility was further weakened and lost much of its grip on the peasants, so the latter had less reason for revolting.¹¹⁵ Erik Thoen has suggested another reason for the lack of rural rebellions, that during the later middle ages, more and more rich peasants became *buitenpoorters* (people with a legal status as burgher of a city but living in the countryside) of one of the cities, thus reducing the social homogeneity of the village communities, a necessary condition for revolt.¹¹⁶

8. Interests and ideology

People acted together in a rebellion because they had *shared interests* and were *conscious* of these interests. Urban revolts in medieval Flanders were not the ‘irrational’ outbursts of the desperate and starving poor. Blind hunger revolts were not typical in Flanders,¹¹⁷ although rising food prices incited desperate craftsmen and urban poor to join or radicalise a rebellion.¹¹⁸ Flemish urban rebellions were acts of politicised and self-conscious burghers, whose interests were expressed in very concrete demands. These mostly had to do with the city privileges, the key

¹¹¹ A survey of the relations between Flanders and the English king in M. Haegeman, *De anglofilie in het graafschap Vlaanderen tussen 1379 en 1435. Politieke en economische aspecten* (APAE, XC – Courtrai-Heule, 1988); of the relations between Flanders and the French king in M. Boone, ‘Diplomatie et violence d’état. La sentence rendue par les ambassadeurs et conseillers du roi de France, Charles VII, concernant le conflit entre Philippe le Bon, duc de Bourgogne, et Gand en 1452’, *BCRH*, 156 (1990), 1–54 and Blockmans, ‘La position’.

¹¹² Blockmans, ‘Alternatives’ and A. De Schrevel, *Le traité d’alliance, conclu en 1339 entre la Flandre et le Brabant, renouvelé en 1578* (Bruges, 1922). About Liège and Ghent: Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 265–70.

¹¹³ R. Vaughan, *Philip the Good. The apogee of Burgundy* (London, 1970), 75–6 and A. Desplancque, ‘Troubles de la châtellenie de Cassel sous Philippe le Bon (1427–1431)’, *Annales du Comité Flamand de France*, 8 (1864–1865), 133–64.

¹¹⁴ Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 299–332.

¹¹⁵ Sabbe, *Vlaanderen in opstand*, 88.

¹¹⁶ E. Thoen, ‘Rechten en plichten van plattelanders als instrumenten van machtspolitieke strijd tussen adel, stedelijke burgerij en grafelijk gezag in het laat-middeleeuwse Vlaanderen’, in: *Machtsstructuren in de plattelandsgemeenschappen in België en aangrenzende gebieden (12^{de}–19^{de} eeuw)* (Brussels 1988), 486–7.

¹¹⁷ The great famine of 1315–1317 did not incite a rebellion: H. Van Werveke, ‘La famine de l’an 1316 en Flandre et dans les régions voisines’, *Revue du Nord*, 41 (1959), 5–14 and Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 92–3.

¹¹⁸ M. Mollat, *Les pauvres au moyen âge* (Paris, 1978), 192–5.

documents determining relationships within the city and between the city and the count of Flanders. Economically, the privileges provided major sections of the middle class with some sort of protection against the vicissitudes of market fluctuations and other uncertainties besetting the small but independent merchant or craftsman. Socially, they made these people into a community, in which they had status. Politically, it gave the whole of the middle class a claim on the authorities, while at the same time keeping the lower classes at bay.¹¹⁹ Even if privileges originated from an idea of ‘communal rights’, privileged groups always reacted to defend their favoured status.¹²⁰

As a consequence, an infraction of the privileges often caused a revolt. When the town hall of Bruges burned in 1280, all the city’s privileges were destroyed, and the count deliberately hesitated to issue them again. This was the immediate cause for the mobilisation of the commoners.¹²¹ The count used the repression of the ensuing revolt, however, to impose new and authoritarian privileges on the city. In the years following the 1323–1328 rebellion, the count gave new disadvantageous privileges to cities and rural districts that had participated in the revolt, but also the town of Alost which had abstained from rebellion.¹²² To prevent Bruges from joining the Artevelde rebellion in 1338, the count cancelled the privileges of 1329 and restored to the city its more advantageous charter of 1304.¹²³ From this moment forward, the struggle over privileges cut both ways. Rebels demanded new rights, or the confirmation, or restoration of established rights. In its turn the comital government used the repression of revolts as a tool for political centralisation and undermining the independent position of the towns, or negotiating and bargaining when a new revolt threatened to break out. For the powerful Flemish cities, privileges were a touchy subject. Often, a seemingly minor infraction of the privileges — concerning the juridical prerogatives of burghers, for example — could have important consequences. When, on 5 September 1379, the bailiff of Ghent arrested a burgher, thus violating the Ghent privileges, a revolt broke out that would last for almost six years.¹²⁴

Social groups could have very different motives in joining a rebellion. Specifically in a commercial city like Bruges, the most important port of Northwest Europe, rebel demands involved economic questions like trade and staple rights. The counts’ economic policies and political relations with France and England were often at stake in late medieval Flemish rebellions, because of the importance of guaranteeing wool imports. Artisans, brokers and merchants wanted an attractive and peaceful economic climate, free exchange, judicial autonomy, low tolls and a stable currency.¹²⁵ Smaller centres always became the victim of the selfish attitude of the more powerful. Competition between Bruges and its outpost Sluis was an issue in the beginning of the civil war of 1323–1328 and again in 1436–1438.¹²⁶ Since the period of Jacob van Artevelde, a recurring demand especially of Ghent and Bruges was the domination over their rural hinterland. They primarily wanted to regulate rural textile industries that posed a threat to

¹¹⁹ M. Prak, ‘Citizen radicalism and democracy in the Dutch republic. The patriot movement of the 1780s’, *Theory and society*, 20 (1991), 94.

¹²⁰ Blockmans, ‘The impact’, 264–7.

¹²¹ Wyffels, ‘Nieuwe gegevens’, 60–2.

¹²² Ibid., 75; J. Van Rompaey, ‘De Brugse keure van 1329 en de aanvullende privileges’, *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Oude Wetten en Verordeningen van België*, 21 (1965), 50; id., ‘De opstand in het Vlaamse Kustland van 1323 tot 1328 en de figuur van Nikolaas Zannekin’, in: *Nikolaas Zannekin en de slag bij Kassel 1328–1378* (Diksmuide, 1978), 117–19.

¹²³ J.A. Van Houtte, *De geschiedenis van Brugge* (Tielt, 1982), 115–16.

¹²⁴ Demuyne, ‘De Gentse oorlog’, 308.

¹²⁵ Blockmans, ‘Princes conquérants’, 177 and Märtins, *Wertorientierungen*, 179–257.

¹²⁶ J. Mertens, ‘De boerenopstand onder Zannekin’, in: *Nikolaas Zannekin*, 98; Te Brake, *A Plague*, 50; Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 89–104.

urban cloth production because of their lower wages.¹²⁷ Furthermore, raising taxes and monetary devaluations without the consent of the subjects endangered the very competitive international market in a city such as Bruges, whose wealth was dependent upon its function as economic gateway with low transaction costs.¹²⁸ Fiscal rebellions remained a classic pattern throughout the middle ages as well. In 1430, a short-lived revolt of a heterogeneous group of merchants and craftsmen broke out in the small town of Geraardsbergen for fiscal reasons (the taxes on beer were raised) amid charges of the financial mismanagement of the aldermen.¹²⁹ When Duke Philip the Good wanted to levy a permanent salt tax in 1447, the whole county stubbornly refused. Members of the urban elite in Ghent quickly allied with the frightened guilds and ambitious members of the middle class who, moreover, saw in this coalition the opportunity to regain their participation in the polity lost after pro-ducal political networks took over city politics. A tough battle between competing networks over the resources of the city and the restoration of old rights lasted until 1453, when a Burgundian victory crushed the opposite networks of the princely loyalists.¹³⁰

Flemish social order was an unstable equilibrium, ruled by a lord who guaranteed the unity of the county and a general policy.¹³¹ This balance of tensions found its expression in the ideology of the *bien public*, *res publica* or *utilitas publica*, the common good that reflected the image of a county as a body politic of several groups with different backgrounds, but living in a common space with common interests like fair justice and economic welfare.¹³² Using this ideology in a rebellion united the opposition against the regime and authorised, or legitimised, the use of force.¹³³ Craftsmen were not primarily driven by ideology, but ‘the welfare of the county and all its inhabitants’ usually formed the undertone of their protest. The Ghent *communitas* of the end of the thirteenth century and the Bruges guilds of the end of the fifteenth century, for example, used the ideology of the ‘*utilitas publica*’ to justify its claims to the patricians.¹³⁴ This common good was expressed in concrete demands: fair wages, a fair use of taxes, ‘no new taxation without citizen consultation’,¹³⁵ no criminal disturbances in the town and accountability of the aldermen. Equality among all citizens was never an issue.¹³⁶ The Flemish urban rebels never questioned the fundamentally unequal feudal order. As we have said, apart from millenarian ‘communist’ movements such as the Bohemian Taborites, some tendencies within the English ‘peasants’ or ‘workers revolt,’ and perhaps groups of radical peasants in the Flemish revolt of Maritime Flanders as well, medieval rebels cannot really be deemed ‘revolutionary’ in the

¹²⁷ D. Nicholas, *Town and countryside: social, economic and political tensions in fourteenth-century Flanders* (Bruges, 1971), 175–200 and Boone, ‘L’industrie textile’, 41–4.

¹²⁸ P. Stabel, ‘Marketing cloth in the Low Countries: manufacturers, brokers and merchants (14th–16th centuries)’, in: *International trade in the Low Countries (14th–16th centuries). Merchants, organisation, infrastructure*, ed. P. Stabel, B. Blondé and A. Greve (Louvain, 2000), 35–6.

¹²⁹ S. Gierts, *De opstand te Geraardsbergen in 1430*, thesis University of Ghent (Ghent, 1996).

¹³⁰ Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 423–36.

¹³¹ J. Dhondt, ‘Ordres ou puissances. L’exemple des états de Flandre’, *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 5 (1950), 296.

¹³² About the notion ‘bien public’: Blickle, *Kommunalismus*, 2, 195–222 and W. Eberhard, “‘Gemeiner Nutzen’ als oppositionelle Leitvorstellung im Spätmittelalter”, in: *Renovatio et reformatio. Wider das Bild vom ‘finsternen’ Mittelalter*, ed. M. Gerwing and G. Ruppert (Münster, 1985), 203–13.

¹³³ Johnson, *Revolutionary change*, 26.

¹³⁴ Prevenier, ‘Conscience’, 178 and Haemers & Lecuppre-Desjardin, ‘Conquérir’, *passim*.

¹³⁵ As in German cities: Rotz, ‘Social struggles’, 88.

¹³⁶ Barth, *Argumentation*, 5–8.

sense of having a genuine programme to overthrow the existing political order and system of property relations.¹³⁷

When comparing different revolts, it becomes clear that rebels, because of their heterogeneous composition, usually demanded a mix of political and economic measures, mostly based on the restoration or the extension of privileges. Although the heterogeneity of coalitions was always their force, divergent interests of groups within or between cities, stemming from different political and economic interests, could also lead to a lack of cohesion and solidarity. Because of this weak spot, there was often a chance for the beleaguered elite or the count to break the rebellion.¹³⁸ Inside the city, the threatened pressure of princely violence could socially divide the community into competing networks, some allying with the count or the former elite, some with those who defended the city privileges. This complicated situation shows that revolts cannot be reduced to battles between craftsmen and patricians, and it also clarifies why ‘internal’ demands of lower strata to city rulers often intermingled with ‘external’ demands to the count.¹³⁹ Thanks to the ‘representative tradition’ of the Low Countries, open conflicts could often be avoided. The ‘Four Members of Flanders’ (Ghent, Bruges, Ypres and the rural ‘Franc of Bruges’) regularly negotiated with the prince to arrive at peaceful compromises.¹⁴⁰ But when this proved to be impossible, the ‘revolutionary tradition’ of the county started a rebellious dynamic of competing and allying networks and alliances, each trying to gain power.

9. Mobilisation and repertoires

In order to achieve the main goal of every rebellion, *gaining power*, rebels first had to *mobilise*. In Flanders, as early as the crisis years 1127–1128, a political culture of mass meetings among citizens, ‘*coniurationes*’ or ‘assemblies’, had started.¹⁴¹ Sometimes the rebels organised these assemblies under the pretext that they were meetings of religious confraternities, as in Ypres in 1280 and 1348, 1362 and 1370.¹⁴² In fact, these meetings were specific organisational structures originating in old Germanic traditions and developed during the process of political emancipation. Usually, mobilisations took place within the context of the traditional types of solidarity and forms of organisation that structured society.¹⁴³ Rebellion was based on former group experience, the backbone of every collective action,¹⁴⁴ on rebellious traditions and on corporate solidarity. These included topographical solidarities (parishes and quarters),¹⁴⁵ professional ties (craft guilds), family ties, political solidarities, factions (like the *Leliaarts* and *Clauwaarts* at the beginning of the fourteenth century)¹⁴⁶ and voluntary associations

¹³⁷ Mollat and Wolff, *Ongles bleus*, 283 and Blockmans, ‘Revolutionaire mechanismen’, 137.

¹³⁸ Blockmans, ‘Voracious states’, 749.

¹³⁹ Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 160 and Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 429.

¹⁴⁰ Blockmans, *De volksvertegenwoordiging*, passim.

¹⁴¹ A. Demyttenaere, ‘Galbert of Bruges on political meeting culture: palavers and fights in Flanders during the years 1127 and 1128’, in: *Political assemblies in the earlier middle ages*, ed. P. Barnwell and M. Mostert (Turnhout, 2003), 151–92.

¹⁴² G. Doudelez, ‘La révolution communale de 1280 à Ypres’, in: *Prisma van de Geschiedenis van Ieper* (Ypres, 1974), 232, 246 and Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 113–124.

¹⁴³ R. Van Uytven, ‘Scènes de la vie sociale dans les villes des Pays-Bas du XIVe au XVIe siècles’, in: *Actes du colloque la sociabilité urbaine en Europe du Nord-Ouest du XIVe au XVIIIe siècle* (Douai, 1983), 11–17; Boone, *Gent*, 57–8; Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 344–5; Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 113–24.

¹⁴⁴ Ch. Tilly, ‘History, sociology and Dutch collective action’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 15 (1989), 145–6.

¹⁴⁵ The working classes often populated the suburbs of the cities: Doudelez, ‘La révolution’, 189, 234.

¹⁴⁶ Respectively the pro-French, patrician party and the party of the commoners supporting the count of Flanders.

(confraternities and shooting associations).¹⁴⁷ Rebels always identified with their city, and less frequently with the whole county, in response to outward threats.¹⁴⁸ And as we have noted above, the occasions were rare when craftsmen, usually the weavers, could identify with their ‘brothers’ from other cities.

‘The more closely we look at that same contention, the more we discover order.’¹⁴⁹ According to Charles Tilly, people have standard routines of action, and groups establish a well-known repertoire of contention, the implications of which are understood by everyone.¹⁵⁰ Medieval rebels indeed tended to utilise the same *repertoire of violence* that they had built up over time. This repertoire included political, financial, social, economic, symbolic, emotional, and ritual violence. When in 1245 the guilds of Douai wanted to gain political influence, they used economic violence by striking, harming the merchants’ economic interests. The Bruges rebels of 1436 stood under the banners of their craft-guilds on the market place, refusing to work (a *ledichganc* or *auwette van der maerct*).¹⁵¹ The craft-guilds also manifested themselves in other collective gatherings. As a reaction to an attack on urban privileges, an impulsive outburst of emotion from the city guilds could quickly evolve from amorphous anger into a cohesive institutionalised protest, namely an armed assembly of the guilds in the city market to defend their corporate identity.¹⁵² The assembled guilds pretended to represent the ‘city commune’ as a whole and presented this political programme in an emotionally compelling ritual by swearing oaths of unity and mutual aid, gathering armed in the city market, and occupying city space and militarily strategic places. From the existing framework of corporate society, combinations of signs, such as banners, ringing bells and marching in order were used. The guilds fought and negotiated for political credibility and public prestige on the market square, since it was the economic base of their existence and the theatre of power claimed by the political communities of city and state.¹⁵³ The gathering of the united guilds was an institutional vehicle for making demands to those in power. Without this vehicle, opposition activity was doomed to fail.¹⁵⁴ And, in addition to this ‘communicative’ function, an armed gathering on the central city square was also a mighty coercive tool that frightened the city elite.

If established groups ignored the efforts of the protesting groups to communicate, and if the established groups did not suppress the rebellion because they lacked superior force, either

¹⁴⁷ In Italian cities as well, political violence was carried out by well-organised groupings: associations of noblemen, guilds, family clans or *consorterie* or armed companies of parishes: Martines, ‘Political violence’, 348; G. Brucker, ‘The Florentine *popolo minuto* and its political role, 1340-1450’, in: *Violence and Civil Disorder*, 155.

¹⁴⁸ Blockmans, ‘The impact’, 265.

¹⁴⁹ Tilly, *Contentious French*, 4.

¹⁵⁰ M. Hanagan, L. Moch and W. Te Brake in their introduction on *Challenging authority: the historical study of contentious politics* (Minneapolis, 1998), xviii.

¹⁵¹ Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 158, 185. Similar gatherings happened in 1488: Wellens, ‘La révolte’, 22-3.

¹⁵² In Ghent this gathering was called a ‘wapening’; J. Haemers, ‘A moody community. Emotion and ritual in late medieval urban revolts’, in: *Emotions in the heart of the city (14th – 16th century)*, ed. E. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A.-L. Van Bruaene (Turnhout, 2005), 63-81; id., *De Gentse opstand*, 195-205. Examples in Bruges: Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 152-7 and Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 112-44. To compare with Blickle, *Unruhen*, 53-4 and M. Prak, ‘Politik, Kultur und politische Kultur: die Zünfte in den Nördlichen Niederlanden’, in: *Zunftlandschaften in Deutschland und den Niederlanden im Vergleich*, ed. W. Reininghaus (Munich, 2000), 71-83.

¹⁵³ P. Arnade, ‘Crowds, banners and the market place: symbols of defiance and defeat during the Ghent War of 1452-1453’, *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 24 (1994), 497; Haemers, *A moody community*; M. Boone, ‘Urban space and political conflict in late medieval Flanders’, *The journal of interdisciplinary history*, 32 (2002), 621-40; *Shaping urban identity in late medieval Europe*, ed. M. Boone and P. Stabel (Louvain, 2000); P. Stabel, ‘Markets and retail in the cities of the late medieval Low Countries. Economic networks and socio-cultural display’, in: *Fiore e mercati nella integrazione delle economie europee (secc. XIII-XVIII)*, ed. S. Cavaciocchi (Prato, 2001), 797-817.

¹⁵⁴ Forster and Greene, ‘Introduction’, 17. See also Hanagan, Moch and Te Brake, *Challenging Authority*, xvii.

from structural weakness or the overwhelming emotional violence of the mobilised masses,¹⁵⁵ the door was open to the rebels and an alternative political group took power. Sometimes, the new government made institutional reforms, as happened in several cities after 1302, guaranteeing the participation of the rebel coalition in the polity. However, the rebel leaders usually merely filled the gap in authority left by the former regime. Aldermen of the city who had fled out of the town, or had been captured and dismissed were replaced by leaders of the revolt. The new power holders had five things to do when they attained power. First, they fulfilled their own demands and those of other coalition members by enacting their political programme. Secondly, after this ‘corrective’ phase of eliminating the abuse, they retaliated against their opponents.¹⁵⁶ The rebel leaders legitimised their position by punishing those who were responsible for the moral discontent. They removed hostile political networks that could obstruct the new leaders’ policy, or, even worse, might take power again. Comital officials were often the first victims in revolts.¹⁵⁷ In 1477 in Ghent, for example, former Burgundian state officials who had carried out Charles the Bold’s centralising policy were sent to the scaffold, together with corrupt politicians and abusers of the privileges charged with misusing their authority.¹⁵⁸ Thirdly, the new power holders had to strengthen their position by the use of violence. Several kinds of violence could be used. Political violence involved the punishment or the execution of princely officers and the revocation of privileges. Exiling members of the elite we consider a form of social violence, and financial violence included fines and confiscations. Forms of violence were usually combined in each punishment. The defenestration of the Ypres burgomaster in 1303,¹⁵⁹ the killing of a former head dean of the guilds who had supported a hated policy of the elite, in Ghent in 1432,¹⁶⁰ or the Bruges murder of the sheriff (*schout*) in 1436, contained political, social, and above all, ritual and emotional violence.¹⁶¹

If not used excessively, violence helped to empower the ruling rebels. Banishing the former regime, for instance, symbolically eradicated the evil of people whom the rebels had fought. Sacking and plundering houses of rich burghers, a recurring feature of Flemish urban revolts,¹⁶² would frighten those hostile to the revolt or rebels contemplating desertion, because rebel leaders had to reduce ‘free-riding’ among participants in the rebellion, the fourth task.¹⁶³ Therefore, leaders often admitted the participation of the great mass of craftsmen in policy. While day-to-day decision-making might be left to councillors, major decisions, like going to war or raising taxes, ought to be made by the community as a whole,¹⁶⁴ according to the ideological

¹⁵⁵ By ‘emotional violence’ we mean frightening insults of contenders, uttering threats to the power holders, caused by the moral discontent of the rebels about political inequalities in town. Violence as a whole is an anti-social action, damaging persons or objects (Tilly, *Contentious French*, 382), used with the intention to disorient the behaviour of others (Zagorin, *Rebels and rulers*, I, 18).

¹⁵⁶ This ‘instinct’ of retribution in revolts is described to the point in W. Beik, *Urban protest in seventeenth-century France. The culture of retribution* (Cambridge, 1997), 49–72.

¹⁵⁷ Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 124–27.

¹⁵⁸ Boone, ‘La justice en spectacle’, 49–59.

¹⁵⁹ J.J. Lambin, *Verhael van den moord van eenige Schepenen, Raeden en andere Inwooners der Stad Ypre, gebeurd den 29sten en 30sten November 1303* (Ypres, 1831).

¹⁶⁰ V. Fris, ‘De onlusten te Gent in 1432–1435’, *Bulletin van de Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 8 (1900), 163–78 and M. Boone, ‘Armes, courses, assemblées et commocions: les gens de métier et l’usage de la violence dans la société urbaine flamande à la fin du moyen âge’, *Revue du Nord*, 87 (2005), 1–33.

¹⁶¹ Lambin, *Verhael*, 11 and Rider, *Galbertus*, 132.

¹⁶² For example in Bruges, 1280 (Wyffels, ‘Nieuwe gegevens’, 64), 1382 (Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen, passim*), 1436 (Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 123) and 1488 (Wellens, ‘La révolte’, 32).

¹⁶³ Brustein and Levi, ‘The geography of rebellion’, 467.

¹⁶⁴ Rotz, ‘Social struggles’, 79.

programme of the *bien public*. During many revolts, the new leaders installed ‘great councils’ to discuss policy.¹⁶⁵ In 1382, Philip van Artevelde even allowed ‘every poor and every rich person’ — only men, of course — to participate in political discussions in these councils.¹⁶⁶ Another possibility was to hold referenda on the city market, so the craft-guilds, rather than the entire body of citizens, could evaluate the policy of the leaders.¹⁶⁷ And, last but not least, the leaders of the rebellion had to build up a military and financial apparatus, a concentration of funds and forces, to resist attacks from the outside. Often, captains were also appointed, as during the revolutionary leadership of the five *hoofdmannen* in Ghent and the military dictatorship of the Bruges *upperhoofdmannen* in 1437.¹⁶⁸

If the count supported the rebels, as in 1302, their participation in politics became permanent. If he did not, and if his interests were damaged, he first negotiated with the rebels, but a stalemate often ended in armed confrontation. An economic blockade could be fatal for the rebels (Bruges, 1437, 1490), just as military battles or exhaustion could bring about their defeat (Ghent, 1453, 1385, 1485, 1492; Cassel, 1328). Conversely a weak count had to give in and confirm rebel participation in the city council, as Louis of Male was forced to do in 1360, or grant privileges or pardon the murders of city councillors, as Philip the Good did for Ghent in 1432, 1436 and 1440.¹⁶⁹ The worst case scenario for the count himself, like William Clito in 1128, was to lose a battle, or, like Maximilian in 1488, to be captured by the rebels. Sometimes ousted urban elites could retake power after internal rivalries enfeebled rebel leaders (as happened to Jacob van Artevelde). After regaining power, the elite deployed its own repertoires to prevent further challenges to their rule. Legal repression of Flemish revolts, discussed in detail elsewhere,¹⁷⁰ usually consisted of fines (*amendes prouffitables*) for the cities, revocation of privileges, execution of the principal rebels or leaders, confiscation of their goods and symbolic humiliations (*amendes honorables*): removing symbols of corporate identity from public space, organising humiliating processions of burghers and erasing the memory of guilds by committing their archives to the flames. To restore order, the central government in the end pardoned the rebellious cities after the repression. But the aggressive character of the humiliating punishments kept the memory of the revolt vivid, and the repressive measures could, in turn, offer a new reason to rebel. These violent dynamics led to a spiral of rebellion, which once again fed the revolutionary tradition and vice versa.¹⁷¹

10. Conclusion

In his survey of the late medieval economic crisis, Guy Bois observed that revolts and rebellions in western Europe almost always appeared in the most developed regions, where ties between cities and the countryside were strongest and people, ideas and information circulated continuously.¹⁷² In the county of Flanders, with its highly specialised economy, social interdependence and political tensions within the population had steadily increased since the economic

¹⁶⁵ As in Bruges in 1382 (Espinass and Pirenne, *Recueil*, I, 602) and 1436–8 (Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 164) and in Ghent in 1539 (Dambruyne, *Corporatieve middenklassen*, 627).

¹⁶⁶ Nicholas, *The van Artevelde*, 165.

¹⁶⁷ As happened in Ghent revolts (Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 239–65).

¹⁶⁸ Haemers, *De Gentse opstand*, 235–9 and Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand*, 232.

¹⁶⁹ Boone, *Armes*, 25–32.

¹⁷⁰ J. Dumolyn, ‘The legal repression of revolts in late medieval Flanders’, *The Legal History Review*, 68 (2000), 479–521.

¹⁷¹ Verbruggen, *Geweld in Vlaanderen*, 153–59.

¹⁷² G. Bois, *La grande dépression médiévale: XIVe–XVe siècles: le précédent d’une crise systémique* (Paris, 2000), 156.

boom of the twelfth century.¹⁷³ The cities of the county of Flanders, with their huge concentration of people, power and capital,¹⁷⁴ experienced a quick succession of rebellions and revolts. Capital and power were not divided equally, and long-term economic evolution and the formation of the state in the Low Countries only widened the gap between those who ruled the town and those who did not. If the fluctuating balance of power inclined too sharply, or if the ruling elite did not allow access to power to privileged citizens and did not satisfy their specific demands, those challengers rebelled. This political consciousness, that one should intervene in politics when necessary, created a revolutionary tradition in towns, and also spiralling violence in the county as a whole.

This remarkable pattern of rebellion started in the phase of ‘communal emancipation,’ the period when the counts granted privileges to the Flemish towns, and social and political contradictions began to manifest themselves in the cities. From the 1280s until the end of the fourteenth century, craft guilds constructed alliances with other potential rebels, such as frustrated bourgeois elements, and fought for political representation and control over fiscal and economic policies. During this phase comital power was weak, and the count often could not act independently to regain control over the major cities of Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. As state power became more and more important after the arrival of the centralising Burgundian dynasty in Flanders, the tide began to turn. The urban elites gradually sided with the dukes, and urban rebellions were less successful. This did not mean, however, that the Flemish rebellious tradition was exhausted. The end of the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century would witness new major challenges to princely power.

To start a revolt, rebels needed to forge strong alliances between different social groups and networks that were alienated from the power structure, and leadership was crucial as well for the outcome of a rebellion. Rebels contacted sympathisers in other cities and sought foreign aid. Their demands included a variety of political and economic measures and were inspired by the powerful ideology of the common good (*bien public*). Rebels mobilised in an almost ritualistic fashion and used different types of violence to gain or consolidate rebel power. All these elements were features of what can be considered a true political dialogue between prince and citizen and between powerless and power-holders in the city.¹⁷⁵ Representative organs could solve socio-political and economic problems, but a rebellion usually ended in a struggle between social groups and networks within the towns, and a war between rebel regimes and prince. These two wars continuously intermingled and created a rebellious dynamic, ending in victory or defeat and in repression. The outcome of the conflict depended heavily on the amount of resources rebels gathered and on the resilience of the power holders and the state.

Acknowledgments

We thank Prof. Dr. Marc Boone (University of Ghent) and Prof. Dr. Wim Blockmans (NIAS) for their comments and Shennan Hutton (University of California, Davis) for correcting our English.

¹⁷³ N. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Basel, 1939), II, 434–54.

¹⁷⁴ Tilly, *Contentious French*, 396: concentration of capital and political power altered the possibilities and forms of popular collective action.

¹⁷⁵ This was also noticed in early-modern France by Beik, *Urban protest*, 1.

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